

SPECIAL SECTION: Glocal Dramatic Theories

Between “Glocal-locality” and “Subversive Affirmation” Introduction to a Special Section on Glocal Dramatic Theories

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The currency of globalization as a framework for cultural research promises a reduction in the parochialism of American theatre studies. Myths of cultural purity, however, still obscure the complexities of theatrical interculturalism. The core difficulty is no longer simply a lack of interest in other cultures. The American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) has signalled a concern with the transnational through recent conference themes emphasizing “borders,” “diaspora,” and “migrancy.” Performance Studies international (PSi) pointedly withholds the capital letter from the third word in the organization’s name to call attention to the work yet to be done. Paralleling the economic mandate within university administrations to provide “global” educations, American theatre departments increasingly seek to add non-Western content to their history and performance curricula, while it has become more common for departmental seasons to feature works from non-traditional repertoires. Recent special issues of *Modern Drama* and *Contemporary Theatre Review* have addressed aspects of theatre and global culture. Nevertheless, conversations in the classroom, the theatre, and even the conference hall frequently remain informed by self-perpetuating presumptions of cultural (and frequently national) coherence. The legacy of Emmanuel Levinas to post-structuralist epistemology (that is, the claim of the Other to irreducible alterity) has inspired an ironic indifference to specific practices that dismantle cultures.¹ Such biases challenge our capacities to attend to how societies and their theatre practitioners synthesize “native” and “exogenous” traditions.

Aparna Dharwadkar has usefully discussed how the prevailing explanatory frameworks of “interculturalism” and “postcolonialism” have each in its own way obscured the development of modern urban theatre in much of the world. The discourse of performance studies has echoed the concerns of many Western scholars of Asian theatre by emphasizing indigenous performance traditions whose formal and technical continuities survived relatively unscathed their interactions with

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exogenous influence. In the 1970s, as complex postcolonial theatres emerged in the booming megacities of the global South, “world” theatre scholarship remained fixated on these predominantly rural traditions.² Performance studies thereby reinforced what Benedict Anderson (following José Rizal) called “the spectre of comparison” between such traditions and Western avant-garde theatres.³ Few alternative frameworks gained currency in Western scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s. In the mid-1980s, Patrice Pavis introduced his “hourglass model,” which depicts intercultural reception as involving a fragmentation of practices in order to pass through a narrow aperture separating source and target cultures. Twenty years later, this model remains a prevailing semiotic description of the transfer of culture between theatrical traditions.⁴ However, Pavis’s model likewise presumes a coherence of “source” and “target” cultures that does not adequately account for postcolonial artists trained in Western techniques who re-acquaint themselves with traditions of their home cultures with which they are less familiar, or those whose societies have been saturated with an imperial culture but who seek ways to clear local spaces for articulating alternative expressions. Dharwadker finds little remedy in a highly text-oriented postcolonial theory, which furthermore shifts attention from the indigenous to the diasporic. The work of theatre practitioners and dramatists deeply literate in Euro-American traditions yet operating within the local communities of third and second world cities seems to slip through the cracks of both intercultural and postcolonial analyses.

This special section on “global and local dramatic theories” draws on work that has emerged within the context of the National Identities/National Cultures working group of the American Society for Theatre Research. This group first convened in 2004 with a mandate to cultivate research projects engaging with the intersection of nationalism with theatre from global and trans-historical perspectives. The call for the group’s meeting in 2008 foregrounded what had been implicit in the impressively diverse array of projects from previous years. The conveners (Evan Darwin Winet, Patricia Gaborik, and Steve Wilmer) asked for submissions attending to the theatrical intersection of global and local cultures within specific national contexts. The projects discussed at that meeting were set in East and Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe. The session demonstrated the importance of locality as pairs of projects based in Cuba and Czechoslovakia explored common issues specific to those nations’ respective histories. At the same time, many concerns recurred across disparate geographies. Other projects dealt with theatres negotiating more than two cultural referents: a national culture, a trans-national culture, and one or more sub-national or alternative national cultures. The articles in this section by Dennis C. Beck and Kyounghye Kwon were revised from papers presented at that meeting. Steve Wilmer, a veteran participant in the group, submitted new work for this journal issue.

In the call for that session as well as for this *JDTC* special section, we invoked

the term “glocality,” which is still uncommon in theatre and performance studies but has been used for two decades within the context of globalization studies. Glocality describes the adaptation of elements of global culture to serve the specific contexts and exigencies of local communities and cultural traditions. It represents an alternative to the hegemonic interpretation of globalization as a unidirectional totalizing process, and a lens through which to attend to what Arjun Appadurai has described as our “many modernities.”⁵ The term first emerged in business circles (as early as the 1980s) before being appropriated by social scientists such as Zygmunt Bauman, Roland Robertson, and Joshua Meyrowitz in the 1990s.⁶ Eng-Beng Lim has prominently deployed it in his analysis of the appropriation of global queer culture into Singaporean theatre (which he calls “glocalqueering”).⁷ Several of the articles in this section adopt this term directly while others use different vocabularies to discuss related operations; however, there is a common effort in all these projects to describe the fundamentally syncretic spaces in which discourses of nationalism play out in confrontation and negotiation with the import and export of other cultural products. These approaches explore the varied globalized economies and cosmopolitics available not to the idealized citizens of postcolonial diaspora but rather to those who “stay put.”⁸

The articles in this special section attend to the exigencies of theatre and performative discourse for those who “stay put” within societies shaped by imperialism as well as localizing discourses that may be described as nationalistic. Andrew White considers the acceptance by Byzantine Palestinian Jews of a “global” Hellenistic culture while affirming their own “national” custom through rejections of Greek theatre couched in sacred writing. Milton Loayza reads David Viñas’s pioneering scholarship on the theatrical genre *grotesco criollo*, as an “interiorization” of the low culture genre *sainete* in relation to the Europeanization of Argentine urban culture in the early twentieth century. In Loayza’s reading, this shift reflects a rejection of the “parapenality” of an abject immigrant experience in favor of a new national “habitus” that embodies global circulations of capital. Glenn Odom and Kyounghee Kwon both wrestle with the “spectre of comparisons” to Western avant-garde theatre mentioned above. Whereas Kwon describes a transition in the later work of Taseuk Oh from a strong identification of Korean modern theatre with Western absurdism in the 1960s to the production of a synthesis with traditional theatres, Odom insists on the necessity to ground discussions of Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan in Yoruba aesthetics rather than in comparison to Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. Beck discusses the work of “authorial theatres” in modeling a “parallel polis” (itself a term ghosted by comparison to Greek democracy) in a Czechoslovakia otherwise lacking the “gray zones” for dissident expression evident in states such as Soviet-occupied Poland. As in Loayza’s treatment of the *grotesco criollo* articulating an Argentine identity, Beck finds in the spatial discourse of these alternative theatres the articulation of a Czech national culture

formulated in opposition to the Soviet state culture. Wilmer reviews the diaspora of theatrical nationalism in various European contexts, reminding us of the seminality of Johan von Herder in promoting the notion of a *Volksgeist*. In the second part of his article, Wilmer identifies a striking recent strategy whereby theatre artists and audiences operating in specific national contexts parodically “over-identify” with nationalist discourse, compelling confrontations that are difficult for governing regimes to counter.

The limits of glocality as a strategy for intercultural analysis may be surmised from Kwon’s term “glocal-locality” and Wilmer’s term “subversive affirmation.” Kwon employs the former to describe the later work of Taesuk Oh, which, like much syncretizing or re-indigenizing postcolonial theatre, “prompts one to encounter one’s own cultural heritage (which had been more or less disconnected from the past) *in the present*, and to employ it *in the contemporary (artistic) frame* for the *contemporary* audience.” Kwon’s perception of the insufficiency of glocality to discuss this phenomenon points to a widespread anxiety in contemporary global theatre scholarship about describing these spatio-temporal negotiations with sufficient specificity. The “here and now” of intercultural performance is an ever-receding horizon. Wilmer’s notion of “subversive affirmation” might be seen as a surprising corollary to Kwon’s hyper-extension of glocality. Artists such as Christoph Schlingensiefel in Vienna and the Slovenian artists appropriating the name of Janez Janša subversively affirm chauvinist nationalisms, invading their interiorities and presenting startling critiques of the local. Between such reinvestments and penetrations of locality, global discourses take on specific characteristics that demonstrate the insufficiency of hegemonic accounts of globalization. We hope that these studies provoke further research.

Notes

1. See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (New York: Verso, 2001) 18-23 and Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester [England]: Manchester U P, 2001) 346, n. 68 and 74.

2. See Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2005) 11-17.

3. Benedict Anderson takes the title of his own work from the Filipino novelist José Rizal who, in his novel *Noli me Tangere*, describes botanical gardens in colonial Manila “shadowed automatically . . . and inescapably by images of their sister gardens in Europe. He can no longer matter-of-factly experience them, but sees them simultaneously close up and from afar. The novelist arrestingly names the agent of this incurable double vision *el demonio de las comparaciones*.” *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (New York: Verso, 1998) 2.

4. Pavis’s seminal article describing his “hourglass model” is “Towards a Theory of Culture and Mise en Scène,” reprinted in *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 1-23.

5. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996).

6. Roland Robertson is typically credited with promoting the term in Anglophone sociological circles as early as 1983, and the term has been expanded by such figures as Zygmunt Bauman and Joshua Meyrowitz. See Robertson, “Religion, Global Complexity and the Human Condition,” *Absolute Values*

and the *Creation of the New World, Volume 1* (New York: International Cultural Foundation, 1983); Bauman, "On Glocalization: or Globalization for some, Localization for some Others," *Thesis Eleven* 54.1 (1998) 37-49; Meyrowitz, "The Rise of Glocality: New Senses of Place and Identity in the Global Village," <http://www.fil.hu/mobil/2004/meyrowitz_webversion.doc> (2004), 21-30. Habibul Haque Khondker provides a useful genealogy of the term in "Glocalization as Globalization: Evolution of a Sociological Concept," *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology* 1.2 (2004) 1-8.

7. See Eng-Beng Lim, "Glocalqueering in New Asia: The Politics of Performing Gay in Singapore," *Theatre Journal* 57 (2005) 383-405.

8. In a lecture entitled "Indigeneity, Mobility and the Cosmopolitics of Postcolonial Belonging," Helen Gilbert addressed the significance of a shift from discussing diasporic identities to the specific issues confronted by cultural workers who "stay put" in local contexts. (American Society for Theatre Research, Boston, 2008).

